

Israel's Elections:

The View from the Arab World

May 3, 1999



Brief Analysis

Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's decision to postpone a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) from the long-threatened May 4 deadline is due in no small part to his intense interest in the upcoming Israeli elections. He and his closest advisers, with the encouragement of Egyptian and Jordanian leaders among others, concluded that a UDI would be a boost for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Many observers had predicted that Arafat would delay a UDI, but less anticipated was the ongoing focus of Arafat and other Arab leaders on the upcoming Israeli elections.

These elections have become somewhat of a spectator sport in the region, with endless speculation as to who is likely to win and what the implications will be. Even the question of whether the Arab world should be concerned with the Israeli elections has become a matter of heated debate. Abdel Bari Atwan, editor of the pan-Arab newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi, launched a scathing attack on Arab leaders for their "unilateral fixation" on the Israeli elections.

Who's Who Among the Election-Watchers: The roster of Arab leaders paying close attention to the election is impressive:

- Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad hosted Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset, for a visit in December during which Israeli politics were the key agenda item. Then, at the funeral of Jordan's King Hussein in February, Asad and his foreign minister gathered with the Israeli Arab delegation to urge unified Arab action to bring a more accommodating government into power.
- Jordan's King Abdullah II recently hosted Center Party candidate Yitzhak Mordechai for a meeting, leading to speculation among Israeli as well as Jordanian pundits that the king is signaling a desire to see Netanyahu defeated at the polls. In January, Ha'aretz reported that King Hussein admitted in meetings with Israelis his 1996 preference for Netanyahu and his decision to avoid any expression of support for Peres, promising that he "would not repeat his mistake."
- Osama al-Baz, adviser to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, hosted Bishara, by then Israel's first Arab prime ministerial candidate, for consultations on March 15. At his request, Egyptian leaders invited Mordechai to visit Egypt shortly before he was dismissed from his post as defense minister, although unfolding political events prevented him from actually making the visit. At the same time, Mubarak and Foreign Minister Amre Moussa refused similar requests by Netanyahu and Sharon.

Arab press attention has also been high and resoundingly negative toward Netanyahu. Al-Musawwar, a state-owned weekly magazine in Cairo, ran an article on March 26 by its chief editor, Makram Muhammad Ahmad, describing a possible Netanyahu victory in dire terms: "Netanyahu does not want peace for Israel; he wants Arab territory . . . His reelection will be a big catastrophe for the future of regional peace and stability because it will only cause more killing, blood, destruction and violence." Government-run Cairo Radio declared on March 1 that "Netanyahu is trying

to get the region involved in a circle of violence and counter-violence, and he is not achieving stability or peace for the Israeli people. . ." The commentator, Hasan al-'Ashmawi, went on to argue that Israeli voters are aware of how damaging Netanyahu's policies are.

Palestinian Views: Neither Arafat nor Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin has openly admitted to having a favorite; Arafat professes that the Israeli elections are a domestic matter in which he would never interfere, while Yasin insists that all of the candidates differ only in style and are equally committed to thwarting Palestinian interests. Yassin insisted in an interview in January that Hamas is "not interested in who loses or wins in Israel because in our opinion, they are two sides of the same coin -- they differ on appearances but they are in full agreement on basic matters."

These protestations of disinterest are not considered credible, however, and have certainly not stopped speculation about the preferences they seek to cover up. A wave of brutal terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas shortly before the 1996 elections led to nearly sixty Israeli deaths, resulting in accusations that Hamas was seeking to help Netanyahu unseat Peres. Hamas vehemently denied this charge, claiming that retribution rather than electioneering was the motivation for those attacks. Many Palestinians are convinced that any act of terrorism before these elections (regardless of intent) will be enough to bring victory to Netanyahu in a close second round. Ghanem Miz'il, a Palestinian professor from Al-Najah University, predicted at a Fatah-sponsored forum on the upcoming elections that "unless there occur acts of violence involving Palestinians, [Labor Party leader Ehud] Barak will win by a narrow margin. If violence occurs, Netanyahu will win." Arafat seems to be taking this type of analysis seriously; reports have surfaced of special efforts on his behalf to prevent terrorist actions during the pre-election period. Jordanian newspaper al-Majd reported in late January that the PA had asked Hamas to stop military operations until after the elections, because any violence against Israeli targets would benefit Netanyahu at the polls.

Netanyahu has raised Arafat's widely perceived preference for a Barak victory as evidence that Barak would concede more to the Palestinians. Barak answered an interview question about Netanyahu's charges by saying, "Arafat is not the one electing Barak, just as Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin cannot elect Netanyahu even though he wants to."

The Israeli Arab Card: Arab leaders who see themselves as having a stake in the elections have turned their attention to Israeli Arabs for information and for action. Arabs make up almost one-fifth of the Israeli electorate and thus have the potential to constitute a powerful political faction, provided they vote in large numbers as a bloc. Many Israeli Arabs continue to believe that beneath the surface, Labor and Likud are virtually identical on issues of concern to Palestinians. In the 1996 elections, which Netanyahu won by 30,457 votes, 19,016 Arabs submitted blank ballots for prime minister, and 15,072 Arabs voted for Netanyahu. This year, Arab voters overwhelmingly prefer Barak (one poll showed 78 percent support for Barak versus 12 percent for Netanyahu). Most analysts predict that the percentage of Arabs voting will be lower in the second round than in the first. This worries those Arabs who do believe the outcome matters; in a race as tight as this, the turnout of Arab voters for a second round may have a decisive impact on the results.

Concern about second-round drop-off has reportedly led Arafat and a number of Israeli Arabs to urge Bishara to drop his bid for prime minister on the grounds that it will split the anti-Netanyahu vote. Bishara, whose support is generally no more than 4 percent in opinion polls, has thus far rejected this appeal, arguing that with so many candidates in the first round, a runoff is inevitable with or without him. He did tell Ha'aretz that if Mordechai drops out before the first round, he would withdraw as well, "if only to defeat Binyamin Netanyahu."

Implications: Arab leaders who are hoping for a defeat of Netanyahu and skeptics who see no difference among the candidates are all avoiding the inevitable result of the Israeli elections: Decisions that have been on hold for months, thanks to the ongoing peace process stalemate, will be placed on the table. Which Palestinian demands -- within the realm of compromise and negotiations -- would Arafat be willing to sacrifice, and which are absolute? Would Asad be

willing to accept less than full withdrawal from the Golan Heights? If Barak wins and displays a much-anticipated degree of flexibility, such politically difficult decisions for Arab leaders will become even more immediate. If Netanyahu is reelected, regional and international leaders will have to accept that he is the choice of the Israeli people, not just a passing phenomenon. Either way, Arab spectators will find that, after the elections, the diplomatic ball will be back in play, on their side of the court as well as the Israelis'.

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